

Q&A with Dennis Vega, Managing Director for Planning, Performance, & Systems, Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources, US Department of State

Reflecting over the more than five years of foreignassistance.gov's existence, what do you think are the biggest accomplishments? What has been the biggest win in the past year?

ForeignAssistance.gov has made great advances since its launch more than five years ago. Its creation and continued existence is a huge success in and of itself, involving leadership and support from the White House, reporting agencies, and the Congress. The Department of State led the effort to onboard the agencies managing foreign assistance funding. Tens of thousands of foreign assistance transactions, updated on a quarterly basis, are now available on the website for public consumption for the first time in history. Efforts like the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), which sets the majority of the standard for U.S. foreign assistance reporting on ForeignAssistance.gov, have helped to normalize the topic of transparency as a regular part of the foreign assistance dialogue.

We are also celebrating many advances that have happened in the last year alone. In June 2015, ForeignAssistance.gov was redesigned to better address the needs of users and streamline the process for locating data quickly and efficiently (see image below). The Department of State also launched a comprehensive agency onboarding toolkit to help bring the remaining agencies not yet posting their data onboard. We are also focused on capacity building to promote foreign assistance data use. We are raising public awareness of aid transparency and its importance by authoring blogs, organizing and speaking at events, and coordinating external outreach opportunities. We are also increasing consultations and relationships with external advocacy groups. At the same time, we continue to be focused on the data itself and added additional budget planning and all new performance data for the Department of State and USAID this past year.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

3 major updates:

DESIGN **DATA** **EXPERIENCE**

The graphic includes a screenshot of the website interface. On the left, there is a photo of a young girl. The central part shows a search results page for Kenya with filters for 'FIND RESULTS' and 'SEARCH RESULTS'. On the right, there is an 'EXPLORE MAP' section with a world map and buttons for 'IRAQ', 'JORDAN', 'SOUTH AFRICA', and 'COLOMBIA'.

What about remaining challenges. A lot of external stakeholders following foreignassistance.gov ask why reporting USG foreign assistance data is so hard and so time consuming. What are the biggest challenges the agencies providing the data face? What are the biggest challenges F faces as the entity tasked with coordinating reporting?

Reporting U.S. government foreign assistance data can be challenging and time-consuming because the complete portfolio involves 22 agencies, all with different missions, systems, and business models for operation. On top of that, our reporting commitments require significantly more data than ever before, and they require a more frequent reporting timeline. It takes time to understand distinct agency business models and accurately reflect the data in a useful, but standardized format across the U.S. government.

This is difficult for the Department of State to coordinate, and difficult for the agencies to grapple with as well. Most agencies do not have a single system in which all of their data needed for [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov) is contained. Reporting foreign assistance often involves compiling and reconciling data from multiple systems, most of which were designed for other purposes (namely, accounting) and cannot be easily repurposed for external reporting requirements.

Additionally, the people who are entering data into the available systems are not the same people who are pulling reports to submit to [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov). This makes it hard to control the quality or identify errors. Another challenge is many agencies have portfolios with a domestic focus. When these agencies try to report to [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov), they face difficulties in trying to parse out those records which are foreign assistance in the giant sea of domestic data.

One major reality faced by all agencies is the finite human and financial resources available to support this work. Difficult trade-offs have to occur between deploying resources to address urgent global challenges and allocating resources for aid transparency improvements. Increased frequency of reporting adds on to the workload of agency staff, which, while inevitable, can make it difficult to generate widespread working-level support. Within the Department of State, for example, the individuals reporting foreign assistance data are often the same individuals working on critical and short-fuse budget development work. When transparency deadlines compete with budget formulation deadlines, the budget **always** wins.

As the lead coordinating entity, the Department of State works with all agencies providing foreign assistance, each with competing priorities, levels of understanding, and resources. Recognizing that our ability to provide detailed technical assistance to all reporting agencies was limited, we developed an onboarding toolkit. While the availability of this toolkit is helpful, in-depth engagement and coaching is still required due to each Agency's unique business model.

A final challenge is how to accurately measure and benchmark progress towards aid transparency. As mentioned above, there is a diversity of business models, types of aid, and systems available at each agency; likewise, this variability exists on a global scale, between donors. Assessments of foreign assistance transparency often do not adequately take into account these differences. Our team works to continually supply new datasets or new data fields, but due to the rigidity of these assessments, we do not always receive recognition for those advances. This challenge can make it difficult for us to motivate some of our internal stakeholders, especially if they have assisted with releasing a new dataset or adding a new data field – an often immense amount of effort – and the external perception is that there has been little to no progress. As organizations assess foreign assistance transparency, we would like to see more flexible assessments that have the ability to recognize the different constraints of agencies across the U.S. government, as well as the donor community writ-large.

From the beginning, foreignassistance.gov has followed the approach of incrementally releasing data as it becomes available. This helps build momentum and maintain pressure for continued implementation, but it's also risky, in that it can result in incomplete (and potentially inaccurate) data in the public sphere. How do you think about the tradeoffs between expediency (getting the data you have out there) and quality (making sure it's accurate and largely comprehensive)? What are some of the ways F and the reporting agencies have been trying to manage those tradeoffs?

There is an inherent tradeoff between timeliness and quality with datasets this large. Our team is very aware of this tradeoff and we are constantly working to balance both aspects of reporting. A key principle of the open data movement is that releasing data, even if flawed, will improve the quality of data at a faster rate than waiting to release perfect data. Given the choice between waiting for a perfect dataset and making information public as it is received, we have chosen the latter. We know if data is released to the public quickly, errors might arise as it is used; on the other hand, if data is held onto until perfect, the public is not given the opportunity to use the data at all.

Our assessment of this tradeoff resulted in a deliberate policy decision, in agreement with agencies, for our office *not* to own the data reported. Agencies provide us with information and are responsible for the quality and accuracy of their submissions. While the FA.gov team coaches the agencies on the reporting process and provides feedback on a near-daily basis, we as the coordinating entity do not change any reporting. Instead, we operate on the continued cycle of improvement to identify errors and drive quality fixes with each agency. We conduct training sessions and workshops with agencies to better help them understand what each field means, and how to coach their colleagues to complete the templates. We walk through our toolkit and answer any specific questions they might have. Beyond the coordination role across agencies to improve the expediency, quantity and quality of data, we work with system owners and producers of data within the Department of State to improve reporting.

Assessments of progress are an important tool to motivate progress but we need to be careful data is not hastily published despite internal concerns about the accuracy, reliability, or appropriateness of that data. They cannot be a disincentive to improving quality. We certainly feel the pressures to report data quickly from external stakeholders in their scoring and assessments of our data, and we try to balance the line of timely but quality information. This is why we have worked hard to release data even when its publication does not earn us credit, such as our performance or budget planning data.

With just one year left in the administration that created foreignassistance.gov, what will be necessary to institutionalize and further the current efforts? What are the top three things the next administration should do to ensure continued progress?

It is very important to institutionalize the open government and transparency foundations laid by the current administration. Fortunately, the requirement to report foreign assistance data has been institutionalized to a degree by OMB Bulletin 12-01 which lays the groundwork for how ForeignAssistance.gov will provide the public with greater access to foreign assistance data, and establish a standardized reporting framework for all U.S. foreign assistance. However, this Bulletin was published in 2012, so we are working on bringing it up to date to reflect the latest updates to the IATI standard and ForeignAssistance.gov.

The next administration should continue to push for agency leadership buy-in, not only for ForeignAssistance.gov but for the open government community and movement started by President Obama in 2009 when he issued his memorandum on transparency and open government. In particular, Agency leadership buy-in is essential to institutionalizing ForeignAssistance.gov's efforts to date. With

competing priorities and limited resources placing additional burden on reporting staff, we are looking to leadership to establish and communicate the importance of this initiative early and often.

To help reduce the burden on reporting staff, when instituting new reporting requirements, it is advisable to examine existing requirements and make an effort to standardize all requirements. We work with agencies that have to report for ForeignAssistance.gov, IATI, OECD/DAC, the DATA Act, Greenbook, and USA Spending, among others. To the best of our ability, we help agencies sort through these requirements and streamline as possible, but as new reporting requirements are considered, analysis of the current data reported should be conducted to identify overlap. Agencies should have a way to report their data centrally and satisfy all requirements through a master cross-walk rather than preparing six different reports.

We also recommend a strong focus on improving data use. In order to continue to drive quality improvements, it is important to demonstrate that this data is useful for internal decision-making. We continue to struggle to convincingly persuade agency employees, who face many competing priorities, the value of aid transparency efforts. This is a shortfall that we have discussed at length but have yet to find an answer.

Lastly, in order to consistently report high quality foreign assistance data, we must automate as much of the data collection process as possible. This requires using systems to collect and report the data. The lack of systems across the government to collect the data we need is by far the most difficult challenge. The need for regular quarterly data necessitates repurposing financial systems and other data collection systems to meet our commitments. We are asking systems never envisioned to collect this data to, in some ways, change their purpose. However, we can't overtax these systems to where they fail their original financial accounting purpose.

Turning to the user end, who are the targeted users? Who actually is using foreignassistance.gov? What are the top things people look for on the site?

The beauty of ForeignAssistance.gov is that it is open to anyone around the world with an Internet connection. Target users include Department of State employees, Capitol Hill Staffers, contributing agencies, and external parties such as civil society organizations, donor organizations, donor and recipient governments, academia, journalists, and the general public (see image below).

Anecdotally, we know that we have a user base from the media, as journalists frequently cite our statistics in their reporting and engage us with questions. We also hear from foundations, who often reach out to seek clarification on the data for research purposes.

Our most popular feature on ForeignAssistance.gov is the interactive explorer map, as evidenced by our Google Analytics insights. People have also voiced they use ForeignAssistance.gov to learn more about agencies providing foreign assistance (through the Agency Pages) and specific sectors of foreign aid (through the Category Pages). We have found users tend to search for top countries receiving aid, such as Israel, and countries that have suffered large-scale humanitarian disasters or other crises.



State Dept.
Representatives



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Contributing
Agencies



External
Parties

It was hoped that the process of reporting data to foreignassistance.gov/IATI would enable agencies to use their own internal data better to improve decision making. Have you seen any evidence that agencies are using data differently? What limits further progress in this area?

The truth is we have not seen agencies using ForeignAssistance.gov or IATI to improve their own internal decision-making. This has not happened because many agencies and internal POCs have their own ways of tracking information, which often differs from the information in the IATI standard. They often keep this information outside of the systems of record for ForeignAssistance.gov, in independently-maintained cuff systems. Internal POCs view this information as more reliable, due to the fact they are pulling data they maintain, as opposed to from a system they have no control over

The Department of State is leading an effort internally to improve State reporting and data systems, which should lead to improvements in the ability of employees to use this data for decision-making. The first phase of this initiative, called the Foreign Assistance Data Review (FADR) produced a [report](#) that examines the current foreign assistance environment at State and recommends improvements. The FADR working group is continuing its work to carry out these recommendations.

It is often postulated that transparency can help improve development outcomes by enhancing coordination, supporting data-driven decision-making, and empowering domestic and host-country stakeholders to enter into dialogue about aid priorities and results. Looking back at five-plus years of foreignassistance.gov, have you seen any evidence of these effects at work? What is needed to better understand linkages between transparency and improved development practice and outcomes? How will a better understanding of these linkages, in turn, help prioritize transparency investments?

The most difficult question to answer for all of us in the aid transparency community is “does all of this effort make a difference?” The short answer is that it should, but we can’t yet definitively answer that question. We haven’t reached the tipping point where the amount and type of data, as well as the format being provided, is sufficient to drive decisions in a way that people envision. The example I hear often is that, ultimately, citizens should be able to track if schools or hospital beds are being provided in the locations that donors and the host government are reporting. While that information is very valuable, we are a long way from consistently reaching that goal. In particular, a few significant barriers will need to be overcome to bring us closer to this goal.

For one, people do not know these efforts exist. USAID conducted a series of [aid transparency country pilot assessments](#) in 2014 which found wide interest in aid transparency, but limited knowledge of available tools and how to use them. The studies found partner country stakeholders, USG staff, and other donor representatives demonstrated a general lack of awareness not only of ForeignAssistance.gov, but also of IATI, the relevance of aid transparency, and the available IATI information. Without knowledge of the available data and tools, potential users were not factoring them into their work. As long as key stakeholders are unaware of the existence of this information, the demand and use for IATI and ForeignAssistance.gov data will remain low.

Second, even if they do learn about IATI, activity level data on quarterly basis with hundreds of data fields are extremely complex data sets that are very difficult to distill for individuals that are not familiar with the data. And, while the data that is available is being presented in a machine readable format that is great for analysis using computer-based analytics, it is not easily digestible to citizens without those resources or skills.

Finally, while outputs such as number of clinics or hospital beds in a country provide an accounting of program activities, this data is insufficient for programmatic decision-making and conveying progress towards country development goals. Therefore, the Department of State and USAID are moving away from simply reporting program inputs and outputs to focusing on program outcomes and impacts. While outcome and impact data is often more difficult to collect and convey succinctly, it is far more important for data-driven decision-making and empowering stakeholders.

We continue to tackle each of these issues through our efforts across all of our teams. For example, we have been engaged in several efforts to promote knowledge of ForeignAssistance.gov, the importance of aid transparency, and data usage tied to program performance outcomes. One of these programs is a public-private partnership between the Department of State and universities called the Diplomacy Lab. In the fall of 2015, we worked with motivated students to promote their awareness of ForeignAssistance.gov and asked *them* to show *us* the value of the data for research and policy decisions. They contributed their own use cases and made valuable suggestions to improve the usability of ForeignAssistance.gov for a general audience as well as for academia. We look forward to continuing this type of engagement, and following up on some of the recommendations provided by the students, as well as from the USAID country studies. We are also engaging directly with stakeholders through virtual knowledge sharing sessions and targeted in person workshops to increase awareness and learn about data use with host-country stakeholders.